Spock considered the weary four seated on the ground. The Speaker sat slumped against the wall, drawn to it like a moth to the flame. The Vulcan also agreed that the artifact should not claim him, but no longer placed any faith in the Ixmahx's ability to resist. Clement and Sunderson he had relegated to the level of responsibilities, if not liabilities, long ago. Nadia had dark circles under her eyes, and she was deliberately making the most of an opportunity to rest, but that gave Spock hope that she still had some core of endurance they had not tapped. Only T'serek of them all had not dipped dangerously into his reserves. He had been very quiet since the two security men had been lost but it was not the quiet of resignation.

"Since the Speaker still perceives the artifact before us, I surmise it is the Romulans behind."

T'serek studied the trail with more interest. "Good."

"Perhaps it is," said Spock. "They could have followed us, but that seems unlikely. They may have devised a no-or-low-energy means of tracing the Speaker in the time at their disposal since they captured the Speaker, but possibly not. However, they had information prior to their arrival, presumably from the faction that originally found the artifact. In that case they may have a means of entry. We will observe them."

And after all their efforts, it was that simple. Hidden in the dark, armed with rocks, they watched S'Tyge and his men approach the wall and produce a crystal rod from a sheath like the scabbard of a sword. It emerged singing-one low, resonant note not unlike the pipe-organ groanings of the earth. The wall answered and parted and the Romulan waved his men through, controlling the door with the rod.

It must have seemed that T'serek's hands materialized from the dark itself when they fastened on S'Tyge's wrist. The Romulan pulled back, calling to his men for help. Light spilling from the far side of the wall could not have improved their vision. They saw their leader extending his hand for help and seized it. T'serek kept his bulldog grip on the hand that held the rod, pulling it out and away from the door.

"No!" screamed S'Tyge, and the released door snapped back on the arm his men held. They heard it break, but the action of the door did not cease. The Romulan released his grip on the rod. "It's crushing me! Open it!" He wrenched his good hand free from the astonished T'serek, and tried to push the door back. "Gods! Open it!"

"The Gods did not assist me, S'Tyge."

That voice whipped the Romulan's head around even while his body spasmed in pain. Spock held the rod well clear of the door. A great shout came through the door, a confused clamour of Romulan voices and then screams to drown S'Tyge's gasps. The Romulan jerked, as if some new agony claimed him, but Spock paid no heed.

"Take his weapons," and T'serek quick hands claimed a sword from S'Tyge's side, a throwing knife between his shoulder blades, another from his boot. He ran his hands up the Romulan's thighs and up the side closest to the door while the inexorable pressure of the door crushing his arm went on and on. The Romulan's lips were squared back from his teeth in agony, and blood bubbled from his mouth as he tried to bite back screams.

"Where is the drug, S'Tyge?"

The Romulan forced his head from side to side, gesturing "no".

"Try his pockets," Spock commanded. "A small capsule."

T'serek found the capsules and gave them to Spock, took the rod in exchange, keeping it well away from the door. His knuckles were white on the artifact and his jaw was set hard, but he never took his eyes from the Romulan.

Spock held out the capsule, considering it. Remembering how the yellow smoke had doubled the pain, bringing him back from the relief of unconsciousness over and over, how it had increased every sensation of S'Tyge defiling his body. Blood trickled from S'Tyge's mouth now as he tried not to scream; with a snap of his fingers Spock could illuminate the pain of crushed nerves and splintered bone into a whole new dimension of agony, double, quadruple the overload and deny release. He reached out....

"No," S'Tyge said, "don't--" And Spock's fingers closed over the nerves in his neck.

"Free him," the Vulcan said, and sat suddenly down, as sick and weak as he had come from S'Tyge's hands. Close. So close to destroying himself forever.

T'serek armed Clement and Nadia with the Romulan's weapons, reserving the sword for himself. Cautiously, he brought the rod nearer to the door and loosened it enough to pull the unconscious Romulan free. But what he saw beyond was enough to make him forget one wounded enemy.

"Mr. Spock."

Wearily Spock lifted his head and saw S'Tyge sprawled forgotten on the ground, pumping blood from a severed wrist. He forced himself to his feet once more and directed Nadia to help S'Tyge. Beyond, in the room they had entered, the Romulan guards lay--a charnal heap of worried, slashed lifeless flesh. Without looking at them, the Speaker pushed his way into the room, past the bodies and began to walk slowly forward.

T'serek looked back to where Nadia was putting the second tourniquet on S'Tyge's arm.

"Do you want him?" he said to Spock. It was a tacit offer to silence the Romulan permanently. The boy was already spattered with the Romulan's blood. His gray eyes were full of light under the dark lashes and heavy brows. His own mishandling, the death of his men, the continuing danger of a live Romulan had not prompted it. Feeling suddenly naked to be seen so clearly, Spock knew it was his own temptation T'serek had seen--and was offering to spare him. He was at a loss for a moment, but of course there was only one answer possible, and it was that he gave, ignoring the spoken question.

"That will not be necessary," he said.

Without comment, T'serek slung the Romulan over his shoulder and they followed the Speaker.

As they passed door after door without incident, Nadia should have been feeling better. From the long dark of the caverns they had come into light, and when a final door opened onto a lift of